

Why in the World Have the Soviets Been Acting in This Way?

BY PRISCILLA JOHNSON McMILLAN

Why did the Russians in Moscow take a series of steps that were bound to ruffle the feelings of the American people right before U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko met in Geneva for a new round of arms-limitation talks?

Just last month, for instance, the Russians arrested on trumped-up charges F. Jay Crawford, Moscow representative of International Harvester, a company that has sold the Russians \$300 million of much-needed farming equipment.

And three weeks ago Craig Whitney and Harold Piper, Moscow correspondents of the prestigious New York Times and the Baltimore Sun, were arraigned on unprecedented charges of slander.

Finally, in the past few days, Anatoly Shcharansky, and Alexander Ginzburg, leaders of the Jewish dissident movement, were tried and sentenced on charges ranging from treason to subversion.

The Russians could not have devised actions more clearly calculated to outrage key opinion-makers in the United States: business, the press, the Jewish community and even President Carter, who had personally denied the chief charge against Shcharansky—that he was a C.I.A. spy. Why did they behave this way?

The answers to questions about Soviet behavior can be simple—or bafflingly complex. This time they appear to be both.

To suggest a simple answer first, consider the sensational defection to the United States four months ago of Arkady N. Shevchenko, highest-ranking Soviet employee of the United Nations and a man with extensive knowledge of Soviet spying operations in the West. Silence now envelops this incident. But in the words of a former U.S. diplomat, the Russians have lately become more and more "reckless" in their use of the U.N. Secretariat as an espionage outpost. By now, Shevchenko in his mysterious hiding place must have named dozens of U.N. employees who are doing double duty as spies for the Soviet Union. Thus the K.G.B., the Soviet secret police, may know what the rest of us do not—that it is in imminent need of fake "spies" and other hostages in Russia whom it can trade for its own real spies in the U.S.A.

But the recent Soviet behavior has more complex motives as well—a fact well known to the specialists but not to the public—For one thing, Russia is already in a leadership crisis over who is to succeed Leonid Brezhnev as the Soviet Communist Party chairman. Brezhnev is clearly unwell.

His physical debility has led to his political impotence. His views no longer carry the weight they once did. As the Politburo member who had supervised the Soviet armed forces, Brezhnev is believed to have been especially sensitive to the dangers of nuclear war and to have been eager

to sign an arms agreement before leaving office. Today, however, control seems to have slipped out of his hands and into the hands of more conservative Party leaders backed by the secret police. These groups oppose any easing of relations with the West because they would inevitably lead to an easing of political controls at home. To them, the SALT agreement is a threat.

Any time of crisis such as the Soviet Union is in now over succession is traditionally a time in which inexplicable, even wild, events occur. It is a time of danger—and of opportunity—for the West.

The final key to Soviet behavior may be the hardest to solve. President Carter has been in office only a year and a half, but already the Russians hold him in contempt. They have taken this opportunity to show the world how they feel by scoffing at Carter's human-rights campaign. Carter, at the outset of his Presidency, spoke out boldly in behalf of human rights, above all in the Soviet Union. The Russians, by sentencing physicist Yuri Orlov in May to 12 years for attempting to monitor Soviet observance of the Helsinki human-rights accords, and by the sentencing of Ginzburg and Shcharansky last week to eight and 13 years, respectively, have shouted out as loudly as they could precisely what they think of Jimmy Carter.

Curiously, the last President the Russians treated with such scorn was John F. Kennedy. Kennedy had barely taken office when, in April, 1961, Cuban exiles backed by the C.I.A. attempted to land at the Bay of Pigs.

The Russians had no difficulty understanding Kennedy's desire to get rid of Castro. What they could not comprehend was why, having launched its attempt, the United States, the most powerful nation on earth, failed to shoot its way in and clean up. The poor opinion they formed of Kennedy was reinforced a few weeks later when Kennedy met with Khrushchev in Vienna and impressed the Soviet leader as a weak young man who was not prepared to be President.

The Russians showed their complete contempt of Kennedy during the summer of 1961, when at last they permitted their German puppet, Walter Ulbricht, to erect a wall dividing East and West Berlin. Then a few months after that they persuaded a reluctant Fidel Castro to accept Soviet missiles and launching sites in Cuba. In September of 1962, while the Russians were serenely shipping missiles to Cuba, Pravda launched a series of verbal assaults on Kennedy that echo the Soviet attacks on Carter today.

But Kennedy had a chance to recoup. In October, 1962, before the Russians were ready, American U-2 aircraft discovered the missile emplacements in Cuba. And, in the crisis that ensued, Kennedy outaced Khrushchev and at last compelled his respect. So doing, he helped to create a climate in which American Presidents have been able, after a fashion, to do business with Soviet leaders—until the advent of Jimmy Carter.

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When confronted, as they are in Carter, with what they perceive to be weakness, the Russians are apt to be tempted into foreign adventure. But this was more often the case under Khrushchev, a gambler and a compulsive risk-taker, than it has been under his more cautious successors. So it is not likely that Carter will be handed an opportunity to prove his mettle to the Russians in a single, spine-tingling moment of truth, such as Kennedy faced in 1962.

Yet short of some such dramatic face-down, it is difficult to see how President Carter is going to wrest the Russians' respect.

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